



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Days of Heaven by Terrence Malick

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8. One wonders, incidentally, just what audiences in the late twenties made of the many films they saw that were liable to burst into sound and/or color at 20-minute intervals before relapsing into silence and/or black and white, and also what aesthetic considerations were at work when directors knew that some audiences would see the film as a silent while others would see exactly the same images with dialogue and music. Fejos's work of this period seems to have been created in accordance with silent film techniques first of all, presumably because the film remained totally comprehensible in this way to all who saw it, whereas a sequence that relied for its impact on a sound effect would have no meaning at all for the many people who saw the film as a silent. Thus, at the end of *Lonesome*, the superimposed shots of Mary's face with the record of "Always" spinning "inside her head" and the song itself on the sound track may seem over-determined to a modern audience, but the superimposition was necessary to get the point across to audiences who would not have the song to guide them. These questions, together with others concerning the exact form in which contemporary audiences saw and heard many important films of 1928-31 (and even later) are worthy of further investigation.

9. This opening sequence is very reminiscent of that of Paul Leni's *The Last Warning*, which was also released in 1929.

10. It is interesting to compare the narrative strategies of this film with those of contemporary works like *The Last Warning* and Benjamin Christensen's *Seven Footprints of Satan* (1929), where equally elaborate and complex plots, based mostly on deception, are to be found. Leni and Christensen both provide resolutions that "explain" the overall series of events, but leave

a good many of the individual details without any explanation at all and just as incredible and "impossible" at the end of the film as they were when they first occurred. The assumption presumably is that, whereas readers of a detective story can go back and check out the logic of the explanation step by step, viewers of a film are in no position to do this and will be contented with a few minutes of plausible mumbo-jumbo at the conclusion to tie up the most glaring of the loose ends. *The Big Sleep* is a later, and obvious, example of the same pattern.

11. *The Several Lives of Paul Fejos*, p. 42.

12. The normal procedure when cutting in titles for the silent version of such scenes seems to have been to show each character at the beginning and end of his speech, with the words appearing on screen in the middle; any camera virtuosity, even if feasible, would therefore have been lost for audiences of the silent version and there would be no point in attempting it. The fact that he was shooting for both versions also forced Fejos to resort at times to silent film techniques of representing sound that seem unnecessary in the sound version: the approach of an intruder to a private conversation, for example, is shown by a close-up of his feet and then a shot of a door handle.

13. It is difficult to judge the quality of the Technicolor from the solitary print in which it appears to survive today. Greens and reds, of course, predominate, but now in a rather muddy and muted fashion, whereas the effect in its original form was more likely to have been brash and garish.

14. *The Several Lives of Paul Fejos*, p. 44.

15. *The Several Lives of Paul Fejos*, p. 48.

Reviews

DAYS OF HEAVEN

Script and direction: Terrence Malick. Photography: Nestor Almendros and Haskell Wexler. Music: Ennio Morricone.

Troops of nomads swept over the country at harvest time: reckless young fellows, handsome, profane, licentious, given to drink, powerful but inconstant workmen, quarrelsome and difficult to manage at all times. They came in the season when work was plenty and wages high, and were very independent of bearing. They dressed well, in their own peculiar fashion, and made much of their freedom to come and go.

They told of the city, and sinister and poisonous jungles all cities seemed in their stories. They were scarred with battles. They came from the faraway and unknown, and passed on to the north, mysterious, leaving the people of Sun Prairie quite as ignorant of their real names and characters as upon the first day of their coming.

—Hamlin Garland, *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1899)

History repeats itself with persistence. When, in 1941, Orson Welles made the most important

American film of the decade, *Citizen Kane*, many critics wrote that it was "too beautiful" visually, "too confused" as a narrative, and "too cold" in its impact. Almost the same criticisms are now being directed at Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*. Everybody is fascinated by its visual (as well as auditory) qualities, yet many find its characters "unconvincing both as people and as symbols" (Joy Gould Boyum), "its drama deficient, and its psychology obscure" (Andrew Sarris); others claim that "most of the film's events take place abruptly, lacking adequate preparation or a dramatic payoff" (Arthur Knight); while some discard it completely as an "overwrought artifact" (Pauline Kael) or "a test case of pretension" (David Thomason) and "one of the most perversely undramatic, uninvolved and senseless movies ever made" (David Denby).

The most surprising—and symptomatic—complaint of the critics is that *Days of Heaven*, what-

ever its cinematic qualities, lacks "drama." Imagine someone criticizing a theater piece because it has drama but "lacks" cinema! As a maker of cinema, Malick subordinates the kinds of dramatic conflicts which might make for good theater, and the kind of narrative line which might make for powerful literature. But Malick's film does not deny the power and impact of the filmed events. Through his directorial method, he conveys the relationships among his characters, reveals their psychologies, depicts the atmosphere of their natural environment and the singular social circumstances in which they live. We must admit that Malick does all this through attention to specifically *cinematic* values, creating a unique composition of image and sound. This film's artistic ambition is high, and its achievement as a work of art in the medium of film places it on an aesthetic level few films even aspire to.

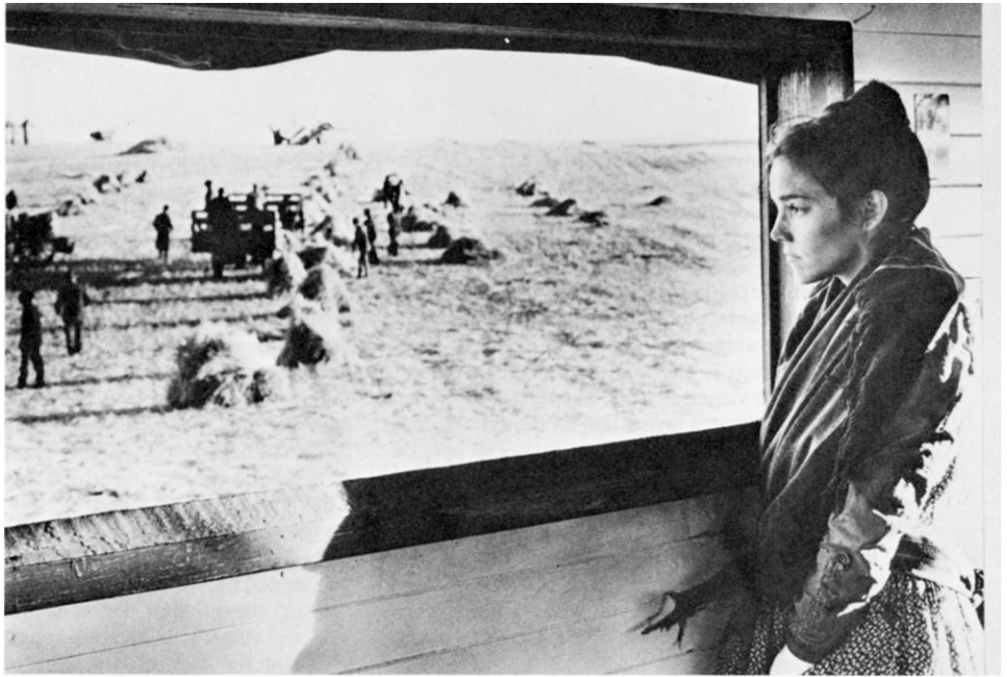
I am not claiming that *Days of Heaven* is a faultless film. I question the clash between its insistence on a documentary depiction of the natural environment and its casting of actors, some of whom are nonprofessionals chosen for their authentic "types," and some of whom are "stars" who do not fit in. Also, in my judgment, certain aspects of the film's construction could be improved. A film of epic proportions calls for a longer and more elaborate development, I believe. Yet, *Days of Heaven* is such an extraordinarily impressive and well-thought-out piece of cinema that any lover of the art of film must gladly forgive its shortcomings. In these times, when we are inundated by films that would not lose much if we only read their scripts (which are usually poorly written anyway) or watched the actors delivering their lines on stage (lines which likewise are rarely well read), we ought to be grateful for a real piece of cinema of high quality.

The narrative line of *Days of Heaven* is very simple and straightforward. In 1916, a group of migrant workers, leaving the industrial area near Chicago, arrive in the Texas panhandle hoping to find jobs harvesting wheat. The plot involves four characters: the young worker, Bill (Richard Gere); his girlfriend, Abby (Brooke Adams); his Little Sister (Linda Manz, a 16-year-old college girl); and the wealthy farmer, Chuck (Sam Shepard, the well-known dramatist). The episodes are narrated

by Little Sister who talks with child-like candor, unpretentious irony, and spontaneous humor. The conflict begins when Bill and Abby, posing as brother and sister, agree to a marriage between Abby and Chuck, believing that the wealthy farmer will soon die of a terminal illness. Chuck gradually becomes suspicious of the situation, and when he finds out he has been deceived, he confronts Bill, and in the ensuing fight, the farmer is killed. After this climactic moment, Bill, Abby, and Little Sister escape from the farm, hiding themselves in the forest. Following a dynamic chase, Bill finally meets his own death while attempting to cross the river. Abby takes Bill's sister to a boarding school, but she runs away from it with another girl who "does not know what to do and where to go."

The visual beauty of this film—however stunning and grandiose—is not a goal in itself. The pictorial composition of virtually every shot is fully integrated with the filmed event. For example, the emphasis on the lyrical beauty of the vast Texas landscape, as shown in the very beginning of the film, fits the excitement and expectations of the migratory workers passing through the wooden archway built in the wheat fields. The chromatic expressivity of Nestor Almendros's (and Haskell Wexler's) cinematography is enhanced by the continuous camera movement. In nearly all shots of the harvest the camera glides, giving the viewer a palpable sense of the rhythm and space in which the action occurs. This is not to say that the camera never stands still: when necessary, as in the tap-dancing scene or in numerous intimate conversations between the protagonists, the camera assumes a single characteristic position, intently "staring" at the events or persons. Yet, visual movement prevails on the screen: its overall dynamism matches the nature of the subject filmed, which is essentially *movement*, that is the constant motion of people, machines, animals, and natural forces. The cinematic dynamism in *Days of Heaven*, intensified by the stereophonic sound, creates the highest degree of kinesthetic impact. Some of the sequences (the wedding party, collective work on the farm, the final manhunt) courageously take the risk of combining the shaky hand-held camera with the most technically sophisticated execution of tracking, panning, and craning shots. In gen-

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eral, Malick's shooting style successfully fuses the best features of Hollywood technology with the new, expressive modes of European and avant-garde film-making.

There is much that can be said about every sequence and almost every single shot of this film. For the moment, I want to concentrate on the breathtaking shot of the train moving over the high bridge construction, photographed against the transparently blue sky and garnished with a thin strip of black smoke. This shot has been criticized—as was Welles's shot of the fabulous Xanadu castle seen in the distance on the hill against the sunset—for being unrelated to the film's content, a "slick slideshot," typical of Malick's "arty" direction. Let us analyze this shot closely and relate it to the film's "content," showing how misguided is the contention that this image is "kitschy."

Among the last shots which precede this moment, are those which show (a) Bill running from the mill, after knocking down the manager, (b) a red-hot bar or pipe collapsing on the steelmill floor, and (c) Bill, Abby and Little Sister walking along the railway tracks toward the train in the distance. Then Malick cuts to the extremely long view of the train speeding over the bridge. The pictorial refinement of this shot makes it a typical *mise-en-frame*, i.e., a shot that captures the viewer's at-

tention predominantly on a graphic-chromatic level. As such, this shot becomes a perceptual shock for the audience, marking the beginning of the next sequence and forming a *thematic* link with the previous sequence in which we see the three protagonists "hitting the road" by catching the train. Logically, the audience wants to know where Bill is heading after his physical assault on the boss. At first glance, it seems that the story will take a romantic-sentimental course, along the line of any number of picaresque movies depicting various adventures of the hero and his lover. However, the subsequent shots (with the poor people riding on the freight train) defeat such expectations. The visual beauty of the landscape through which the train passes continues to be captivating for us, the viewers, but not for the people on the train, including Bill, Abby, and Little Sister. Their expressions, their demeanor and their dress indicate that we are not going to see a love story, and that we *will* have to involve ourselves mentally in the film's development. Thus, from the very beginning, Malick invites the audience to participate in resolving certain problems posed in his film. His primary function is not to entertain us, but rather to engage us in a polyphonic structure devoid of external suspense.

Malick's type of stylization can be related to the

great film masters of the past, though it is not mere mechanical imitation of other films. By its emphasis on deep focus (perspective), and low shooting angles, it is reminiscent of Welles (although Welles tends toward Expressionism); by its concern for the lyrical depiction of objects, buildings, machines and vegetation, Malick can be compared to Kubrick (although Kubrick depicts the environment and things in the modernist form). Malick's preference for visual contrast in exterior sequences is close to Murnau's stylization (although Murnau deals with black-and-white contrast). The epic development of the narrative in *Days of Heaven* is carried out with a true sense of space and time, the sense that characterizes Dovzhenko's works. The notion of mass movement, social turmoil, and the concept of reconstruction of the past in *Days of Heaven* parallel Ford's best films. Malick's tendency to poeticize the objects and details of nature can be related to James Agee's concept of cinema. Also, Malick's inspiration draws from painting as well. The graphic and chromatic execution of the shots depicting spacious landscape can be seen as "homage" to Edward Hopper, while the concept of diffused light in interiors (created without the use of artificial light sources) is a cinematic transformation of the luminous atmosphere found on canvasses by Jan Vermeer. Malick showed similar concern for the film heritage and inspiration from painting in his first feature-length film, *Badlands*, but in *Days of Heaven* he fully succeeded in transforming each of these components, and integrating them into a personal cinematic style.

The motion picture images in *Days of Heaven* are, in their own way, a cinematic tribute to the twentieth-century photos of the American west. Yet, Malick's vision of history and geography is poetic rather than factual. I am sure that ornithologists will find that some of the bird sounds are not actual sounds of the birds shown on the screen; or, some zoologists will claim that not a single bison was in the wild at the end of 1916. These inaccuracies and anachronisms are, however, justified by the overall poetic vision of the entire period and the general atmosphere of the environment as depicted in the film.

The greatest kinesthetic impact which permits the audience to penetrate the characters' moods and conflicts stems from the dynamic interaction between the captivating composition of the shots

(filmed on 70mm Panavision), and the most expressive stereo sound (Dolby System). The vibrant movement of color images projected on the huge screen, intermittently harmonized with and juxtaposed to the stereo sound, provides a new dimension for the disjointed narrative line. Thus, many aspects of the film's content—especially the environmental atmosphere, the mass psychology, the characters' intimate feelings and their subdued moods—are conveyed in a way that no words can express. This means that we do not experience the film's content predominantly through the dialogue or dramatic conflict, but through sight-and-sound. The interaction of stereo sound and Vistavision image penetrates the thematic connotation of the filmed events to the point that they cannot be comprehended by the conventions characteristic of traditional narrative or dramatic forms. In fact, the complex visual and auditory counterpoint compensates for the lack of dramatic tension conceived of in theatrical terms. The fractional structure of the narrative is emphasized by long fade-out/fade-in transitions between the sequences; they are consequently perceived like loosely related "pages" from a memoir. Malick obviously wants his audience to contemplate the previous sequence and to *think* of its meaning before the next event begins to unfold. This type of cinematic punctuation concurs with the disjointed and dispersed commentary narrated by Little Sister, whose sentences are casual and often incomplete.

The issue of narrative is the most perplexing aspect of modern cinema. Some film theorists argue that the plot in modern cinema must be radically subverted by surrealistic displacement of the logical order and spatial development of the story, primarily on the basis of the stream-of-consciousness technique (as Resnais did in *Last Year at Marienbad*). Then, there is a tendency to suppress or circumvent the plot and to maintain it at a "low-key," non-suspense level (as Antonioni did in *Eclipse*). Malick belongs with those directors who resist the dominance of the narrative in film by developing events which are linked associatively instead of dramatically. In doing so, he intentionally detaches the audience from the story and the characters' destinies, urging us to experience the film's real meaning *via* means that cannot be and are not supposed to be conveyed through the plot line. Not being able to identify ourselves with

the sketchy characters, we become concerned with the whole group of people and its position in the given historic conditions. This emotional detachment from the narrative and its protagonists is made possible by the use of the mosaic technique of building the film. The main purpose of this technique is to liberate the narrative structure from the romantic mode of story-telling, while, in turn, emphasizing its emotional relationship to the ambience. Malick needs this detachment because his main interest is to depict the movement of a specific group of people joined together for economic reasons. He draws his imagery of this movement from his personal experience when, as a poor teenager, he was a migrant worker, following the harvest from his native Texas north to Canada. In the film, however, he reverses the migration geographically: the seasonal workers move from Chicago to Texas, although the actual filming was done in Canada (Alberta).

Placed against a lyrically photographed landscape filled with blue sky, white clouds, and golden wheat, the existential problems of the seasonal workers assume a sardonic note through the development of the prosaic love triangle which ends in the death of the two male participants. The consistently gorgeous shot composition therefore functions as a counterbalance to the insipid action (plot) in which the protagonists are involved. The conflict among them and their fight to survive—both physically and psychologically—are so rudimentary that they are not even aware of its implications. Furthermore, they are so submerged in the tension created by the circumstances that they cannot see the beauty of the surroundings in which they exist. While we, as I mentioned, are enthralled by the landscape through which the train passes in the beginning of the film, the close-ups of the workers on the train are grim, introverted, brooding—obviously preoccupied with the uncertainty of whether they will find jobs in the South. However paradoxical it may seem, the three surviving protagonists become aware of nature's beauty only when they break with social structures: after killing the farmer, Bill, Abby, and Little Sister run away and for the first time enjoy boating on the river and living in the forest (Little Sister says that she has never before seen the beauty of nature). Metaphorically speaking, this implies that human beings can be happy only if liberated from the rigid

restrictions of society and traditional institutions, even if this liberation is accomplished by violent means, and may be short-lived. This point is reiterated at the end of the film when Little Sister runs away from the boarding school without any idea where to go or what to do. As Malick suggested in *Badlands*, the price that his characters must pay for their breaking with established social order and morality is their own defeat: they accept it with childish self-delusion as if satisfied to be "happy" for at least a short period of time. But, they are not truly content in these "days of heaven" because they are nothing but glimpses of happiness that make their downfall even more hideous, since they know that they are doomed. Obviously, Malick is not preoccupied with the plot as the film's component which functions for itself; for him the story must work through a contrapuntal interaction with the other ingredients of the film. In fact, the first sign of dramatic conflict between the characters occurs after half an hour of the film's development, when Bill suggests that Abby accept Chuck's offer to stay on the farm after the harvest is over in order "to have a happier life." Until then, various sequences depict the workers' arrival at the farm, the atmosphere in the wheat fields, a religious sermon marking the beginning of the harvest, the functioning of the machines, harvesting, the reaction of the animals to the intrusion of machines into their territory, exploration of the landscapes, etc. Then, another thirty minutes of film time is dedicated to the atmospheric mood on the farm—the interval after Abby marries Chuck and before he realizes that she and Bill are not brother and sister as she had told him. The tension among the three protagonists progressively becomes more acute, while the actual conflict is built slowly by exchanging the sequences of the bare fields after the harvest, the carefree and somewhat boring life in the mansion, Bill and Abby's secret meeting at the brook under the moonlight, President Wilson's train passing near the farm, hunting, and the arrival of the "Flying Circus." Even when Chuck discovers that Bill and Abby have intimate relations, the confrontation between the two men is again delayed by Bill's decision to leave the farm with the "Flying Circus," which leads to another set of sequences depicting life on the farm in the winter time, the coming of the new spring, the second arrival of the seasonal workers, Bill's

return on the motorcycle, the plague of locusts and the fire in the field. These two catastrophes structurally prefigure the physical encounter between Chuck and Bill. After the disasters, the plot develops more quickly: the second fight between Bill and Chuck results in the farmer's death. Subsequently, Bill, Abby, and Little Sister run away from the farm, and wander along the river hiding themselves in the forest. The closing manhunt ends with Bill shot down while trying to cross the river. The brief epilogue deals with Little Sister: Abby takes her to a boarding school, but she escapes with her friend without any prospects.

The plot is designed as one of many elements in a broader epic structure which is linked, as I mentioned, by prolonged fade-out/fade-in transitions that emphasize the segmented composition of the narrative. The audience is kept in complete darkness to ponder for a while the previous scene, often to resolve it for themselves, and to be ready for another experience. Against this, the prolonged dissolves are used to condense events and to indicate passage of time, while at the same time creating visual symbols which comment upon events and objects. For example, the flock of flying birds merging with the branches of the trees serves as a poetic, visual *coda*, appearing on the screen just before the wedding ritual in the forest; the grand mansion seen doubled on the screen (one view of the building superimposed on another, filmed from a different distance and under modified lighting) gives the impression of a mysterious castle in the midst of nowhere.

Malick's narrative ellipses work in three ways: occasionally he omits part of the action, most often the ending, because the resolution is clearly implied by the situation and environment; sometimes he leaves it to the audience to resolve the sequence for themselves; but most often the intrinsic meaning of the sequence becomes vivid later when associated with subsequent events. Thus the secret meeting between Bill and Abby in the moonlight would lack its deeper meaning were it not situated at the brook where they drink champagne and play with each other running through the water. The brook near the farm is repeatedly shown as the site where the workers find pleasure and happiness: Bill and Abby revisit it to live out their childish fantasies. In this context the "arty" image of the

wine glass, lying on the bottom of the brook with a fish lithely circling around it (as in a fancy aquarium), is an ironic underscoring of their fragile illusions about happiness. Similarly, the shot of the *nature morte*, (the close-up of the decorative carafe of wine with two crystal glasses placed on the antique table near the window) is inserted at the moment when Bill inspects the farmer's house after Chuck and Abby have left for their honeymoon. After their return, Chuck's growing suspicion of the situation and the resulting tension between the protagonists is momentarily relieved by the unexpected arrival of the "Flying Circus," which can be read as a symbolic relaxation since the three artists indeed come "from the sky." The comic exasperation of the Italian clowns breaks the anxiety on the farm and the tension is apparently resolved since Bill decides to leave with the Circus.

Bill's return to the farm renews the tension which had subsided during his absence. The anxiety is intensified even more by the concurrence of two natural disasters—the onslaught of locusts and the wheat fire. Malick repeats close-ups of the locusts devouring the wheat to signal—in a repulsive way—the forthcoming calamity: the magnified mandibles of these small insects become on the screen monstrous jaws, a threatening portent of the apocalyptic disaster soon to come. Certainly, the encounter between Chuck and Bill would look historic and psychologically unjustified without instigating the tension created by the wheat fire: irritated and anguished by the devastation of his land, Chuck manifests his physical suffering and his hatred of Bill.

As we see, Malick's script is composed as a poetic and elliptic film-log: most of the sequences only initiate the theme or conflict which will be developed and resolved later, indirectly adding to the subdued psychological interaction between the characters. We are encouraged to follow—and experience—the multi-faceted progression of time and its effects on human beings. In this context, it seems justified that some aspects of the characters (such as their past or the psychological motivation of their spontaneous actions) are left unexplained and unresolved. Some complain for not being allowed to identify with the "psychological depth" of the characters. But Malick intentionally presents his four protagonists without their past

and future: at one point Little Sister describes her fellow workers as having no particular destination in life, because "when you've done your work, that's it . . . they do not need you any more . . . they always know they can get someone else . . ." Unaccomplished, without hope and uncertain of tomorrow, these "mysterious people, ignorant of their real names" care only for their current existence. Consequently, the audience can witness only their immediate reactions to situations into which these outcasts are thrown and over which they have no control.

Hence, there is a tragic aura that constantly hovers above almost every gesture, expression and word of the characters. This tone is adequately echoed in the vocal modulation of the commentary which Little Sister delivers with nonchalant pace and with great colloquial grace. A similar mood is evoked by the nostalgic musical motif (composed by Ennio Morricone) repeated at the crucial points of great mass movements which assume parable proportions.

The stereo sound emphasizes the spatial aspect of the film image; it works both horizontally and perpendicularly: the audience receives information about the events occurring outside the frame which triggers its imagination constantly. Our visual perception is recurrently challenged by the complex sound track so that we often become aware of the depth of field on the screen by hearing sound which moves from the close foreground and disappears into the far background. This differentiation of the sound zones is paralleled by the frequent appearance of graphic foregrounds in the shot, as various objects pass in front of the moving camera. The cuts generally occur at the moment when objects enter the foreground, creating a blurred, almost abstract, pattern on the screen; in contrast to this, the subsequent image provides a clear view of another aspect of the same scene. This builds great kinesthetic dynamism as in the plague of the locust sequence and especially in the prairie fire. The apocalyptic meaning of these sequences is distinguished by the dynamic editing combined with constant camera movement and shot compositions which vary from the graphically depicted "locust rain" to the abstract images (mise-en-frame) formed by the tongues of flame quivering in the extreme foreground. The impact of these images

is further intensified by the counterpoint between the camera movement and the wide scale of the projected image, deep-focus, often silhouetted composition of the shot, the veristic atmosphere of the scene and the imagist use of color.

The real "drama" in *Days of Heaven* emerges from the symbolic mismatching of the trifling love triangle and the complex socio-environmental setting. Mismatching is also foreshadowed by the documentary footage (including authentic photographs of the period and silent Chaplin slapsticks) and highly stylized pictures (there are moments when the farm house and the gazebo in the field look like surreal sculptures). But the final result is the unification of the authentic and symbolically stylized elements so delicately achieved that the sensitive audience accepts it as a cinematic revelation of the inner meaning of the events, objects, landscape, animals, and human beings depicted on the screen. Malick explores all the capabilities of modern film technology, as Kubrick did ten years earlier in his *2001: A Space Odyssey*, proving that the technological evolution of this medium need not "kill" its artistic capacity, but, on the contrary, can open up new opportunities for artistic expression.

It seems preposterous that some critics overlook the *cinematic* function of the visual beauty in *Days of Heaven*. They blame Malick for making each shot "more beautiful and exciting than the previous one," failing to understand that the visual beauty in this film serves as an element in a counterpoint that becomes ever more substantial. As the visual and auditory impressiveness increases from sequence to sequence and from shot to shot, the personal situation of the characters becomes more and more hopeless, as they are pushed toward their own tragic fate. Chuck dies lying on his field—devastated by locusts and fire—surrounded by his horses, which he sees for the last time through the smoke that blurs his view of the sun. Bill dies in the water, more precisely in the river: after he is shot down from behind, we see him in a medium shot, photographed from under the water, as he falls on the water's surface in slow motion, his face deformed with pain. As viewers, we instantly associate this shot with the shot of the lost wine glass lying on the bottom of the brook. Similarly, the final shot of Little Sister

walking with her friend away from the camera along the railroad tracks brings to mind one of the introductory shots in which we see her running with Bill and Abby over the railroad tracks in Chicago. The position of the camera distinguishes these otherwise similar shots: while the Chicago shot is photographed from a very low angle which emphasizes the distant horizon, in the latter a slightly high angle shortens the perspective into which the two girls wander aimlessly.

From a structural viewpoint, *Days of Heaven* is built as an "inverse symphony," in that it has a strong accent at the very beginning (montage in the mill), and ends with a subdued epilogue (the two girls leaving the boarding school). If we exclude the overture (which serves as the background for the credits), composed of authentic photographs from the period, the introduction is conceived as a brisk cinematic movement. Then follow many sequences of various dynamic intensities, among them machines reaping the wheat, the harvesting celebration, the locust invasion, the field fire, and the death of the farmer. The end seems toned down and quiet: after the long travelling shots of Bill, Abby, and Little Sister on the boat and walking through the forest, comes the stationary shot of Bill's dead body floating on the water. The epilogue is conceived as a conclusion which reinforces the open structure of the film and provides the final ideological statement: we see Little Sister and her friend disappearing in the distance without knowing where they are going. Using T.S. Eliot's vocabulary, one would say that *Days of Heaven* begins with a "bang" and ends with a "whimper."

Segmentation of the film's structure would show how Malick built *Days of Heaven* on a musical principle. I discerned 65 clearly differentiated segments conceived in variable rhythmic beats, each relating to the filmed event. For the purpose of this review it will suffice to indicate only the most noticeable rhythmic blocks which provide the overall flow of the film. As has been said, after the overture (with the documentary photographs) comes the first sequence, which is cinematically compact and bristling; then follow fifteen sequences executed with the camera movement in relatively slow rhythm. Next three extremely dynamic sequences showing workers and machines in the field create a visual "allegro" on the screen;

another set of five "adagio" sequences depicting the atmosphere on the farm is broken by the montage of the workers' entertainment (dancing, swimming, playing games); a dozen sequences executed in the "andante" tempo occur before the second arrival of the seasonal workers. The tempo of these sequences is achieved by a "vivace" combination of montage and hand-held camera movement. Another dozen atmospheric sequences precede the plague of the locusts and the wheat fire, which are the two most dynamic montage peaks designed as pure "presto con fuoco." After the farmer's death, the tempo of the gliding camera over the river and through the forest is emphasized by "moderato" elegance which intensifies the lyrical movement broken by the forceful chase at the end that leads to a "lento" finale. It is difficult to find a recent American film which relies so strongly on the musical-rhythmic structure of its sequences and their interaction. For his great care for structure, Malick deserves special acclaim.

In both *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* Malick's directorial style is at the same time realistic and metaphorical. Realistic because it preserves the documentary nature of the film image on the spatio-figural and auditory level; metaphorical, because it uses the specific filmic devices to raise the photographed events and objects to the aesthetic as well as ideological levels. As I explained, the lonely mansion erected in the wheat fields is perceived on the screen on the one hand as the authentic mid-Victorian clapboard house and on the other as a metaphor of power, alienation and comfort, symbolizing the social contradictions in which the human conflicts are located. Similarly, the introductory montage sequence in the steel mill stands as the opening rhythmic accent, justified by the protagonist's physical outburst which anticipates the climax of the entire film and whose full meaning will become clear later. The locust invasion and the wheat fire are, cinematically, movements that foreshadow the tragic resolution of the conflict among the three protagonists. Rhythmically, the dynamic montage intermixed with sequences composed of long-takes and slow movement within the shot, forms the musical structure of the film, which has an open ending, like an unfinished ballad. We leave the theater recalling the images with great sensory-motor reverberation, as if we have heard a symphony whose sounds remain

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long with us. Hence the film lingers in our mind after first viewing, and the longer we think about it, the stronger is our desire to see it again. Then the real values of *Days of Heaven* come through: we appreciate it as a saga of American working-class life at the outset of the century. The elliptical progression of the narrative line becomes justified, because Malick uses it to counterpoint the plot with the mood, atmosphere, psychic tension and poetical accents emerging from the auditory-visual movements that saturate every single shot. We realize a more profound dimension of the film: it is not only a "treat" for eyes and ears, as many critics stated; it is more than that, since its inner structure stimulates us to think about what we see and experience on the screen. What remains in our memory are not only beautiful shots, but a "Gestalt" feeling of space and time, atmosphere and mood, which characterizes all great films.

Those who complain that *Days of Heaven* "suffers from the deficiencies of drama and its obscurities as psychology," either want to impose obsolete expectations and demands on a film which denies traditional narrative conventions, or are insensitive to the values of true cinematic poetry, or perhaps both. With his second full-feature film Malick proves that he possesses vital cinematic consciousness: in a sense, he continues the tradition of D.W. Griffith, who gave us great cinematic epics of American history, although the narratives of his films—if judged in isolation—could be most trivial.

Days of Heaven will be studied by those who care about film as an art form, and will come to be recognized as a classic of the American cinema. Unfortunately, like many other films of artistic significance, this film has not yet attracted a large audience. The trade reports say that it is not "doing well" commercially in spite of many rave reviews. However, all those who want to support real creative tendencies in cinema ought to approve Malick's decision to withstand Hollywood's temptation to push its directors into commercialism, even if he must wait another five years to realize his third film. This is small compensation to an artist who does not want to make aesthetic compromises. At the same time, we must recognize the paradox that Hollywood *did* produce *Days of Heaven*. The only acknowledgment of such an unexpected gesture may come from those who prefer



Brooke Adams and Richard Gere: DAYS OF HEAVEN.

film as art to film as entertainment. It will also encourage Malick to persist in his ideals about cinema as a means of artistic expression.

—VLADA PETRIC

THE AMERICAN FRIEND

Director: Wim Wenders. Script by Wenders, based on the novel "Ripley's Game" by Patricia Highsmith. Photography: Robby Müller. Music: Jürgen Knieper.

Karen Jaehne's essay "The American Fiend" in *Sight and Sound* (Spring 1978) and Michael Covino's piece "Wim Wenders: A Worldwide Homesickness" in *Film Quarterly* (Winter 1977-78) have both perceptively treated *The American Friend*—the former in the context of the attack on American imperialism it shares with Werner Herzog's *Stroszek* and the latter in the context of its place in Wenders's canon. Yet neither has done justice to the film's highly developed self-reflexiveness—particularly its evocation of *film noir* and its extensive casting of film-makers—that distinguishes it from the rest of Wenders's movies and that suggests a comparison with Fassbinder's *American Soldier*. Both films parody the *film noir* genre while simultaneously exposing the corrupt American values it has exported to Germany; yet *American Soldier* is an early minor work in Fassbinder's canon while Wenders's *American Friend* is a major achievement, for this self-reflexive level is richly interwoven into the many other thematic threads that create the film's complex texture.